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# Winthrop Class Visited Cuba This Summer As Countries Work to Rebuild Relationship

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# Winthrop Class Visited Cuba This Summer As Countries Work to Rebuild Relationship

## Quick Facts

- History Professor Ginger Williams said there is no comparison between what life is like now in Cuba and how it was 11 years ago when she was last there.
- Williams said it is sad to her that the United States hasn't been involved in rebuilding Cuba.



Alexander Nowlin with Cuban schoolchildren

ROCK HILL, SOUTH CAROLINA – Winthrop University History Professor **Ginger Williams** recently returned from leading students to Cuba and found a country that has thrived in the past decade.

"There is no comparison between what life is like now in Cuba and how it was 11 years ago when I was last there," said Williams, who teaches **Latin American history** and **peace studies**. "Buildings have been refurbished, the people look contented, and whereas there was so much lacking during the 'Special Period.'"

She said it is sad to her that the United States hasn't been involved in **rebuilding Cuba**. "They've done it largely on their own, but with the help of other countries too," Williams said. "The embargo is a **Cold War legacy** that needs to be lifted immediately."

## Severed Ties

**President Barack Obama** has been working toward restoring ties with Cuba and establishing an embassy there. After **Fidel Castro** came to power, the United States severed diplomatic ties with Cuba in 1961 and began pursuing covert operations to overthrow the Castro regime. Successive U.S. administrations have maintained a policy of economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation for the past few decades.

Williams recalled when she was heading to Cuba in 2003, **President George Bush** had just announced that the small country near Florida was being added to a list of terrorist countries.

Another difference between Cuba today and Cuba in the 1990s and early 2000s is the **availability of food**. The food is now both varied and abundant, Williams said. "In the 1990s food was scarce," she said. "On my first visit in 1994, I was hungry the entire time I was there."

## Fascination with Cuba

One of the 12 students on the Winthrop and government-sponsored trip from May 20-June 2 was **Alexander Nowlin**, a rising junior who is a political science major from Bluffton, South Carolina, and vice chair of the **Council of Student Leaders**.

He said he has been fascinated with Cuba and the United States' relationship since middle school. He couldn't fit in a study abroad experience for a whole semester so this class and accompanying trip

worked out well. “I was surprised how friendly and welcoming the Cuban people were,” Nowlin said. “After the revolution, the Cuban people still needed allies and a networking venue.”

He’s excited to see the U.S. and Cuba work on rebuilding **an official relationship**. “I felt it was about time,” he said. “The people we talked with were looking for positive ways to build their economy. They have important needs such as health care and infrastructure that has been hindered because of the embargo.”

Nowlin was struck by the unity of Cubans who seem “all in it together as a community and as a nation.” Williams added that Cubans are very proud of their history and love to share it with outsiders. “They say that they welcome the end of the embargo and the American tourists that will come as a result,” Williams said. “We’ll see what happens after the floodgates open.”

### Parallel Classes, One Trip

Williams and **Adam Glover**, a Spanish assistant professor, team-led the trip to Cuba. Although Cuba is on the verge of growth due to normalizing relations with the U.S., only certain groups of people can still travel there, including educators, humanitarians and journalists.

Williams and Glover taught separate classes at Winthrop beginning in February – his was an advanced Spanish course on history and literature of Revolutionary Cuba and hers on the same readings but in English. The separate classes then met up for the trip for a combined experience.

They toured Havana, took a two-day bus ride to Santiago, visited Trinidad and Camaguey, and even took salsa lessons. “We visited Guantanamo and saw the fence that divides the American side of the base from the Cuban side,” Williams said. “That was poignant.”

For more information, contact **Judy Longshaw**, news and media services manager, at 803/323-2404 or [longshawj@winthrop.edu](mailto:longshawj@winthrop.edu).

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